

Health Benefits of Minimalism

by

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Abstract

The term minimalism has assumed a multi-faceted definition and been used to describe everything from an aesthetic, to religious simplicity, to a personal cleanse from overindulgence. Operationally defined, minimalism is a societal movement in response to the excessive consumerist mindset adopted by many Americans. Anti-consumerism does not circumscribe the the “American Dream” as a commodity; however, it redefines a meaningful life as one full of experience and human connection. Additionally, research confirms a positive correlation between this minimalist lifestyle and personal health. Stressful living environments are conducive to poor mental and physical health. Therefore, a simplistic lifestyle, minimalism, offers a more internally-peaceful life free from external chaos.

Introduction

Through meta-analysis or a synthesis of scientific studies, a cost-benefit analysis of minimalism and tiny house living as a practical application of this lifestyle is conducted. The varying aspects and spectrum of minimalistic living are reviewed along with the idea of building the smallest space necessary for existence. This analysis is conducted with respect to scientific journals, a sociological encyclopedia, and the media craze--tiny houses. A cross section of blogs and the general public opinion on minimalism versus the scholarly research conducted on its inverse, consumerism, will help to define this movement. Minimalism is important because of its end goal--internal peace. Research suggests that living with less can eliminate daily stresses that progress to physical ailment and mental exhaustion. Ridding oneself of these seemingly miniscule stresses and unconscious daily decisions can provide clarity of mind and a more peaceful existence.

Literature Review and Methods

American Dream

In a society that values belongings over individuals, human interaction can feel like a transaction. The constant strive to purchase items for status rather than for necessity or purposeful use, can lead to a cycle of irrevocable unhappiness. The short-lived “high” from pleasure-purchases inevitably contributes to the addictive behavior of consumerism. The “American Dream” is to attend a university, with a predetermined major in mind, that will lead to a particular well-paying profession. This vocational mindset towards education is simply to acquire a job with the ability to progress within the company, or climb the corporate ladder. While some may enjoy their profession, that is not the main goal of this mindset. The attraction of these corporate positions is the accompanying salary. With this massive salary,

immaculate houses and extravagant cars can be purchased to project the image of wealth and desirability. On the contrary, minimalism is innovative and rebellious. Instead of observing immaculate houses with covetousness, the minimalist perspective views housing as a structure to provide the most basic necessities for life—a place to sleep, maintain personal hygiene, and house very few personal belongings. The structure itself becomes less of a focus in the minimalistic lifestyle. Instead the experiences outside of the restricting four walls are the main concentration. In addition, extravagant cars are viewed by minimalists as unnecessary because their intended purpose is transportation. The minimalist's goal is to minimize the amount of consumption in order to fund what is truly important and soul fulfilling to each individual. If housing and transportation are simplistic and meet the most basic of needs, they are sufficient (9) (11) (13).

Tiny Houses

The tiny house movement has practically embodied minimalistic idealism at its core. Less commitment, more flexibility, less materials, and more energy efficiency are all potential benefits of this movement. Tiny houses are often mobile because they are built on trailers. This mobilization allows for less commitment to a particular geographical location and allows more flexibility within career options. Selling a house to move for a job is no longer an issue when the house is mobile. The idea that the house itself is actually a tiny structure means that it would require less materials to build and less energy to sustain life within the house. Tiny house owners frequently report that they view the outdoors differently after living in such a small structure. The outdoors become another room in their “house”, and they find themselves enjoying nature-enriched activities because of the freedom and vast space offered by the outdoors. Many tiny house builders use recycled materials to construct their homes in order to have less of an impact

on the environment. To further the environmental benefits of tiny housing, many builders have decided to use solar energy to power their homes. Energy efficiency is another benefit of living simply (5) (8) (10).

In order to conserve space within tiny spaces, dual purpose furniture has revolutionized the home décor market. Wall-hangings that double as dining tables, cupboards that house full kitchens, and beds that can be stored away in a drawer, are all examples of space-conserving furnishings. A special trend within tiny houses are the themes portrayed by the residents. Since there is not much space within these housing-alternatives, the items that truly matter to the residents are readily displayed. Hobbies and interests are clearly designated their own storage areas and incorporated into the space. This practically-applied form of minimalism has been described as trendy; however, some may argue that the lavish-mansion lifestyle is more of a fad. The consumerist craze is just as easily a whim of post-depression, industrialized, America. Minimalistic living may simply be a return to the one-room cabin lifestyle that the founders of this nation were accustomed to. Consequently, this movement could arguably be the essence of American living. Tiny house living is a redefinition of the American dream. Why spend time working to keep a lavish house when, without that structure, one is left with excess funds to pursue personal passions? Rather than building a house as a storage building for personal belongings, small, purposeful, spaces are built with the intention of housing the most primitive of possessions. It is liberating to value human interaction and experiences over purchasable good. Using items for their intended purposes and living with nothing more than what is needed provides a clarity of mind (11) (12).

Potential Health Benefits

Anthropologists, social scientists, and archaeologists found that having a surplus of things can cause health issues. Clutter can affect people mentally and physically. Stressful home environments can lead to physical ailment. Elevated blood pressure is a physical indication of significantly higher stress levels. Interestingly enough, German Trappist Monks, who live a voluntary minimalist life in observance of Roman Catholicism, do not experience traditional blood pressure elevation with age. In order to further research this correlation between a simplistic minimalist lifestyle and improved internal health, a series of blood and saliva tests could be performed to observe cortisol levels in the bodies of voluntary minimalists. Specific religious groups such as the Amish, Catholic Monks, and Mennonites live voluntary anti-consumerist lifestyles. Speculative research on the overall wellbeing and stress levels of these people groups could lead to further connections between health benefits and living with less. Minimalist homes offer a peaceful aesthetic that contributes to internal tranquility. Converting to a minimalistic lifestyle requires the rehousing of personal belongings through donation, consignment, and giveaway. With less items of clothing, dishes, products, and electronics to choose from, daily stresses are eliminated. Spending decision power on the miniscule daily tasks such as what to eat for breakfast and what to wear can be exhausting. These small decisions add up and take away from one's ability to make decisions when they truly matter. By eliminating the unnecessary, more power is saved up for what truly matters (1) (4) (6) (7).

Deprivation

The typical response to minimalism or to tiny house living is a reaction to deprivation. However, deprivation is not the end goal of a minimalistic life. Happiness is the end goal. William Morris outlined minimalism in this way: "Have nothing in your house that you do

not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful” (16). Living minimally does not mean living without things, it simply means filling life with things that add value. A minimalist is never going to be found reorganizing the clutter in the garage on a Saturday morning. Rather than reorganizing, they remove. This way, minimalists can invest in their own personal style rather than keeping up with trends. The minimalist journey is individual. Each person begins at a different starting point and the end result is unique to each minimalist. It is a spectrum. Having the least belongings does not mean “winning” at minimalism. It is a mindset. Living with only what is absolutely personally necessary is the ultimate goal in striving towards this state of mind. Joshua Becker, the author of *Becoming Minimalist* says that “minimalism is intentional promotion of the things we most value and the removal of anything that distracts us from it.” Intentional. Minimalism is purposeful and intentional (2) (8).

De-cluttering

According to the *Los Angeles Times* there are 300,000 items in the average American home. And according to the Self Storage Association, there are more than 50,000 off site self-storage facilities in America; meaning that there is approximately 7.3 square feet of storage for every person in the nation (2). These shocking statistics beg the question of why so much space is taken up storing the junk that people hold onto but never actually use. The rent payments every month directed towards these facilities and the millions of dollars that self-storage facilities receive every year to simply house superfluous belongings is absolutely ludicrous. American consumerism is a product of the well-researched media tycoons and advertisement agencies that appeal to the population’s childish tendencies to impulse-purchase. The minimalist reaction to these statistics are articles and blogs that advocate the “Capsule Wardrobe” and “10 Ways to De-clutter Your Home.” While these titles may seem overused, they are in pursuit of the clutter-free

mindset that minimalistic living offers. Minimalist jargon, the capsule wardrobe, is essentially a set number of items to attempt to reduce clothing options. Some capsules advocate no more than thirty items, forcing a person to choose their absolute favorite pieces that truly embody their personal style. This cuts out all of the outfits that are being saved for that theoretical occasion that will probably never occur. Owning only clothing items that portray an individual as they want to be seen means that the decision of what to wear every morning just became much simpler. Another typical minimalist activity is a “Box Party” in which all items that are not direct necessities are boxed up and if they are not retrieved within three months for an actual need, they are donated and given away. This is a practical way to downsize belongings in phases, especially when moving. These minimalistic strategies help people to let go of belongings and hold onto memories. Memories become part of a person’s identity, that is why some people hold on so tightly to objects. Objects can bring back special memories, and it is easy to emotionally attach oneself to an object simply because of the memories associated. However, a picture of that object is a space-conserving alternative that will result in the same nostalgic feelings without the accompanying clutter. Less clutter leads to less space needed to hold clutter. Less space leads to smaller rent payments and excess funds to allocate to education, travel, and experience--more valuable clutter replacements (3) (8) (16).

Practical Application

Another way to view minimalism, is just simplifying life in every way possible. Washing clothes less often, automating bills, and clearing out an email inbox, all cut down on daily stress that is not always acknowledged as significant until it all adds up. Minimalism does not imply frugality in every aspect of life. Purchasing quality over quantity is the main premise; borrowing instead of buying whenever possible, and choosing to spend money on things that either add

value to daily life, make life easier, or are personal passions. It is a good thing to give up mindless shopping in the name of minimalism; however, it is also okay to spend or even splurge on the things that truly add value and joy to daily life. Minimalism is not living with nothing and counting pennies, it is ridding life of what is unnecessary in order to make room for what is enjoyed and personally important to each individual. Spending money on exotic ingredients to make a meal one time can seem anti-minimalist; however, if cooking is a passion--pursue it. Not every minimalist is the same, it is a spectrum, there are areas of even the most minimalistic human's lives that are consumeristic to an extent. The minimalist mindset, however, remains. Being conscientious of what is consumed and expelled is simply responsible and mature. Spending money on hobbies, experiences, and learning new things will never be regretted. For those who do not like to cook, simple eating is a practical minimalistic application. Buying foods that do not require much preparation along with minimal options, eliminates stress in the grocery store and in the kitchen. In addition, saving money in other areas in order to eat out more often and avoid cooking all together is another practical way to make life simpler and less stressful (8) (11) (13).

Happiness

The end goal of a minimalist mindset is internal peace, and clarity of mind--happiness. The writers at *SoulPancake* conducted a study on the acquisition of happiness. Each test subject was asked to think of a person who was the most influential in their life. The subjects were then asked to write a letter thanking this influential person for their investment. Then, to the test subject's surprise, they were asked to call this person and read the letter that they had written to them. This tangible expression of gratitude elevated each test subject's level of happiness exponentially. *SoulPancake* suggests that gratitude is the "Science of Happiness"; they argue that

gratitude contributes to happiness more than any other singular influence. Another factor that perhaps the writers of this prominent site did not take into consideration, is the joy that accompanies human interaction. Humans are social beings and require these interactions for optimal existence. One of the main premises of minimalism is the fostering of important relationships. With less daily stress, life-clutter, and commitments, minimalists are freed up to better pursue relationships with family and friends. Instead of superfluous commitments, minimalists are able to experience life alongside the people that matter to them most. This means more opportunity for these important human interactions and more opportunity to express gratitude. With less of a media life, actual face-to-face encounters are a highlight of a minimalistic lifestyle (13) (14).

Implications

The benefits of minimalism are abundant. When objects are not the main focus of life, experiences and relationships become the priority. In order to research this topic further, interviews within the Tiny House community could be conducted. Also, interviews with people practicing minimalism in different facets like in urban cities versus country-living could be conducted to compare how their resources affected their view and definition of minimalism. The minimalist mindset is universal, comparative analysis between people of different cultures that are practicing minimalism could give insight into just how creative one can be with the resources at hand. Consumerism is universal as well; however, some of the most prominent examples of over-consumption are epitomized in the American culture. In some other cultures, living with more than what is needed is considered frivolous. Researching the application of minimalism in a culture that is primarily minimalistic already, could give way to new ideas and unforeseen benefits. Living with less forces relationships with other people because there undoubtedly will

be a time when an item needs to be shared or borrowed within a minimalist community. These life-giving human interactions can be further researched to investigate the correlation between the expression of gratitude, human interaction, and happiness. An aspect of this research that was not conducted but should be considered, is the idea of forced minimalism. Impoverished people live minimally, not by choice, but by necessity. The difference in these two forms of minimalism could be studied to see if the same benefits of minimalism apply to people who live non-voluntary minimalistic lives. Tiny house living is practical for some people; however, it would be interesting to examine a change in family dynamic from living in a normal home to a tiny home. In order to further research on this topic, these different aspects of minimalist culture--tiny house living, human interaction, and the expression of gratitude could all be studied with respect to a simplistic lifestyle.

Conclusion

Minimalism is a process. A simple life is not created overnight; it is the result of a personal journey endured by each individual. The idea of ridding life of clutter, not just objects, but anything standing between a person and their goals, is atypical to American culture. People tend to hold onto clothing, memorabilia, and objects that remind them of a particular time. Consumers tend to impulse-buy in order to keep up with trends. All the while, stockpiling inanimate objects that have no real meaning. Experiences have meaning. People and relationships have meaning. These are the things that should be stockpiled and invested in. Self storage units should not exist to the extent that they do today. A business built upon storing other people's things because they are unable to let go, or too selfish to purge, should not thrive the way that it does. Living minimally is rebellious in a sense. The mindset that emotional attachment does not belong to objects but rather to people and memories is seemingly radical.

However, this idea leads to such internal peace. Human connection is a true source of happiness. Life should be rich in experience, not in possessions. Steve Jobs unintentionally outlines the purpose of a simple life stating that “your time is limited, so don’t waste it living someone else’s life. Don’t be trapped by the dogma--which is living with the results of other people’s thinking. Don’t let the noise of others’ opinions drown out your inner voice. And most important, have the courage to follow your heart and intuition” (2). Live radically. Live minimally.

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